

'Enough rice to last up to 6 months'

PETALING JAYA: Malaysia has enough rice to feed the population for four to six months in case the Covid-19 crisis is prolonged, according to an expert with Khazanah Research Institute.

Senior associate researcher Sarena Che Omar said the issue with food security is not in production, but transportation and distribution.

She said that besides rice presently available in the market (in the mills, supermarkets and with wholesalers), there are 150,000 metric tonnes in emergency stockpiles spread throughout Malaysia at secret locations.

The stockpiles are managed by Bernas at locations which are not revealed for security reasons.

Sarena said Malaysians consume about 200,000 metric tonnes of rice a month. For two-and-a-half months, she said, the country needs about 500,000 metric tonnes of rice – the present volume in the market.

For four to six months, about 800,000 to 1.2 million metric tonnes are needed.

According to industry insiders, she said, more than 100,000 metric tonnes of rice are on the way to Malaysian ports.

On top of that, Malaysia produces 60pc to 70pc of the country's total rice consumption.

She said different regions would harvest padi at different times, making the monthly average about 140,000 metric tonnes.

"If you put all together, it's actually four to six months (supply of rice)," she said.

Transportation problems affecting food security.

Sarena said problems with transportation and distribution had caused food shortages.

She said the rules under the movement control order (MCO) had caused confusion in terms of who was allowed to operate.

"The agriculture ministry did come out with a guideline a few days after the MCO

to say that people working in agriculture may still go out and work.

She said it was also possible that employers may not have allowed them to work or that they themselves may have been afraid for their own safety.

Sarena said the food shortages were also partly due to panic buying and hoarding, which "tipped the scales" in the supply chain.

Labour shortage during MCO

Yeong Sheng Tey, a senior researcher at the Institute of Agricultural and Food Policy Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, spoke of manpower shortage faced by farmers under the MCO.

He said that under the MCO, only a small number of people were allowed to work in farms, wholesale centres and storage centres.

Yeong also said employers had sent foreign workers home just before the MCO came into effect.

There was evidence, he said, that ports had been busy shipping out foreign labour who could not afford to live without any income during the MCO period.

'Consider items like bread as essentials'

Sarena said that since the 1960s, people had diversified their diets and now depended less on rice.

They had increased consumption of other items, including meat and seafood, and as such, there was a need to consider other foods as national staples.

She suggested including bread as part of the country's essential food items, due to Malaysians' higher consumption of wheat products in recent years.

"Before the MCO, we would never think of bread as an essential food item," she said, referring to reports on social media complaining of the shortage of bread in supermarkets.

"One of the things to look at are changes in our dietary needs. Don't follow policies developed in the 1960s."

Yeong said the government should look at diversifying food items that are being imported. – FMT